

# **ALONE AT THE TOP:**

**A REVISIONIST HISTORY TO DETERMINE THE TRUE MEASURE  
OF PRESIDENTIAL SUCCESS**

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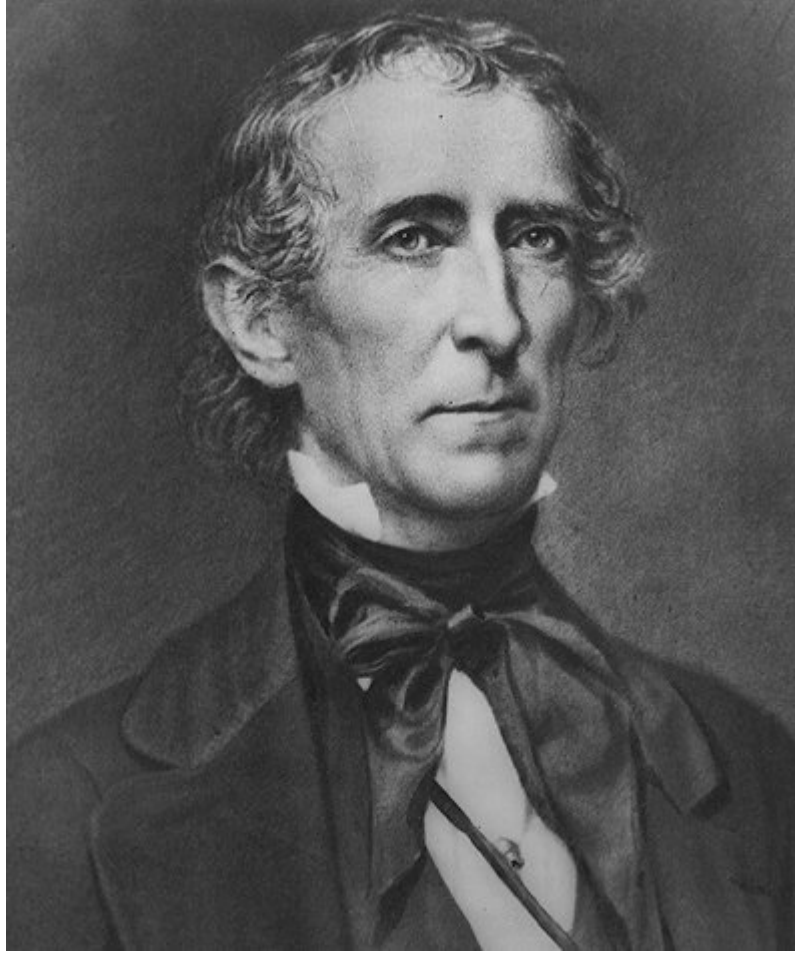
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**PRESIDENT HARDING (SECOND FROM RIGHT)**



**PRESIDENT TYLER**



PRESIDENT JOHNSON

**“Being president is like being a jackass in a hailstorm. There's nothing to do but to stand there and take it.”<sup>1</sup>**

**-Lyndon B. Johnson**

In his typical blunt delivery, Lyndon B. Johnson, the 36<sup>th</sup> man to serve as U.S. President describes the pressure and public scrutiny that appears to be inherent with the title of, “leader of the free world.” Forty-Four men have held the position of President of the United States over the last two-hundred and forty years, all of them as unique and original as the population of the country they led. From a slave-owning planter from Virginia to an African-American law professor born in Hawaii, the individuals elected as president echo the growth and evolution of a nation. However, as historians reflect on the contributions of each presidency, some are remembered fondly as American heroes and others are scorned as failures, who neglected the responsibilities the position entails. Annually, United States historians are polled and asked to rank the previous presidents in order from most successful to least effective. Throughout the years most of the fluctuation in ranking occurs in the middle of the order, rarely is there a drastic change at the top or bottom. Men like Abraham Lincoln and George Washington usually find themselves at the top of the list, remembered fondly for leading the nation through trying times. History seems to ignore any shortcomings of these men, and acknowledges only their contributions.

Other men, for one reason or another, are not as fortunate. As Table One indicates, several presidents are consistently ranked at the bottom by historians.<sup>2</sup> In the same way the faults

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<sup>1</sup> *Lyndon B. Johnson*. (<http://www.politicalquotations.org/american-presidents/>) (25 August 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Table One. *Rankings of U.S. Presidents by Historians*  
([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical\\_rankings\\_of\\_Presidents\\_of\\_the\\_United\\_States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_rankings_of_Presidents_of_the_United_States))

of “the best” presidents are ignored, these men seem to be defined by theirs. Three presidents, from three separate periods of United States history epitomize this concept. As the table indicates, John Tyler, Andrew Johnson and Warren G. Harding have found themselves in the bottom quartile since the earliest historical polls were taken. Each man is remembered as a weak and inefficient president. However, in a position as complex as United States president, political and social contexts must be examined to determine whether or not these presidents lacked the necessary attributes and skills necessary to be a proficient leader or are they simply victims of circumstance, written off because of conditions out of their control..

A closer examination of the presidential terms of all three men, reveal that conflict with the party which empowered them, rendered them politically handcuffed, unable to administer any sort of agenda, because of partisan conflict. John Tyler was a staunch defender of state’s rights, who was put on the Whig ticket because of his opposition to the Jacksonian Democrats who were controlling Washington in the 1830’s. When he became the first vice-president to ascend to the presidency after the death of an incumbent, he quarreled constantly with the Whig party, led by Henry Clay, who was determined to implement his own plans. Tyler’s early political career and success while in office expose him as a capable leader; however the problems inherent in his own party prevented him from a successful term as president.

Johnson too had the unfortunate disadvantage of replacing an incumbent. However, he was replacing Abraham Lincoln who is almost unanimously considered the United States most capable president.<sup>3</sup> He also faced the daunting task of trying to reunite the country after the civil war had torn it apart. He is written off as a poor president because of the two attempts to impeach him; however his Johnson’s case is much more intricate than that. Before his death, Lincoln laid down a lenient but important plan for reconstruction which proposed a swift and moderate readmission of states to the

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<sup>3</sup> See Table

Union. After his assassination, the Radical Republicans who controlled congress looked to limit the power of the president and administer their own severe plan for the south. Johnson stood his ground and refused to be influenced by the members of the party which had selected him as their choice for vice president. His impeachment more accurately reflects petty political backlash to this resistance than his inability to lead.

Warren G Harding too lost the support of his party, but in a very different way. A handsome newspaper man from Ohio, Harding was chosen for his ability to unify the party and insistence on a cohesive Republican agenda. He is remembered by historians as being completely incompetent because of the number of political scandals that took place during his term. However, the men who committed these crimes were the politicians that Harding had trusted and chosen to aid him in leading the country. Although he was guilty of extramarital affairs, historians have proven that they are willing to forgive these types of indiscretions, especially during times of economic or political success. Harding had flashes of success during his term; however these are ignored because of the amount of corruption occurring during the same period. A lot of the historical opinion emanates from the fact that after he died in office, he was abandoned by his party and became the scapegoat for all of the problems the GOP faced under his leadership. Unable to defend himself, history's opinion of Harding has evolved into one of a womanizing, oblivious buffoon, which is both unfair and inaccurate.

An examination of these three presidencies together, uncovers an important aspect about what it takes to be considered a successful president. While it is important to have the support of the majority of the country, it is even more vital to retain the backing of the party which elected you as their representative. When they left office, Tyler, Johnson, and Harding were all outcasts from their parties, and the historical polls mirror that. While president none of these men could advance their agenda, or any plan of action for that matter, because they were at odds with those closest to them. All three proved during their time as President, that had they maintained control of their parties they could have been decisive and capable leaders, and historians should consider that when comparing them to other presidents.



John Tyler

**“Popularity, I have always thought, may aptly be compared to a coquette—the more you woo her, the more apt is she to elude your embrace.”<sup>4</sup>**

It is fitting that Tyler should show such disregard for popularity considering that today he is considered one of the least preferred presidents in United States history. He spent much of his presidency in a heated feud with not only other political parties, but members of his own cabinet. Similar to other presidents considered ineffective by history, John Tyler was a victim of political circumstances which were largely out of his control. A review of the controversy which causes him to be painted in a negative light, reveals a man who protected his beliefs and the beliefs of his constituents. However, several factors allowed Tyler to gain a reputation as one of the least capable men to hold the title of President of the United States. First of these factors is that Tyler had the bad fortune of being the first president to enter office to replace the incumbent. Before the death of William Henry Harrison in February of 1841, no president had died in office and the issue had never been addressed. Under contemporary standard political practice two politicians with similar ideology run on the same ticket, representing a unified party doctrine. However, in the election of 1840, the Whig party, to which both Harrison and Tyler belonged, was more worried about wresting the presidency from the Democrats, and Martin van Buren, then political

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<sup>4</sup> Joslyn Pine, ed. *Wit and Wisdom of the American Presidents*. (New York, Dover Publications 2001) 24.

harmony. It is the lack of a cohesive ideology amongst the Whig party which is the real reason for Tyler's poor reputation. The shaky foundation on which the party had been formed and operated was finally exposed during Tyler's term. Unfortunately for Tyler, the inadequacies of his party prevented him from addressing his own issues or any type of agenda. Had he not been politically handcuffed by his fellow Whigs, and a congress heavily influenced by Henry Clay, Tyler could have accomplished more during his term. Even under these favorable conditions, the triumphs of his presidency, like the annexation of Texas and a re-assertion of the Monroe Doctrine, are largely ignored.

To fully understand Tyler's conflict with his fellow Whigs, an examination of his background and political program is required. Tyler was born to a wealthy, Virginian, plantation owning family on March 20, 1790 in Charles City County Virginia. His father was a close friend of Thomas Jefferson, so naturally, coming from the same community as Jefferson, Tyler adopted many of the same political beliefs, including constitutionality and states' rights. Tyler was raised as part of the slave owning aristocracy of the early 19th century south, and attended the College of William and Mary from which he graduated in 1807. After serving but seeing little action during the War of 1812, he began to practice law alongside his father. His background made it seem he was destined for politics and soon after beginning his legal career he was elected to the Virginia council of State in 1816. After, a Democratic-Republican spot opened in Congress following the death of Virginian representative, John Clopton, Tyler was the choice to replace him. After serving two consecutive terms in congress, he withdrew for health reasons and returned to Virginian politics. After serving on the Virginia House of Delegates for five years, from 1820-1825, he was elected the governor of Virginia in 1825. Following three years as the governor of Virginia, Tyler moved to the Senate in 1827, where he served for nine years until he

resigned in 1836. It was during his time in the Senate that he was a part of a crucial schism in American political history, which centered on the policies of Andrew Jackson, and would eventually split the Democratic - Republican Party. Two rival factions were created, the Jackson led Democratic Party and the Henry Clay led Whig party. It was a split which would temporarily align Tyler's political interest with Henry Clay and the Whigs.<sup>5</sup>

The Whig Party was created in opposition to Jackson's strong centralist policies, in which he constantly tried to assert power of the presidency over Congress. During his early years in the Senate, Tyler found himself favoring the Jackson led Democratic faction of the party. In fact during the main controversy which caused Henry Clay to split from Jackson, the veto of the renewal of the Second Bank of United States Charter, Tyler supported Jackson.<sup>6</sup> In his farewell address Jackson warned against the connection between the banking system and the government, "Recent events have proved that the paper-money system of this country may be used as an engine to undermine your free institutions, and that those who desire to engross all power in the hands of the few and to govern by corruption or force are aware of its power and prepared to employ it."<sup>7</sup> Considering Tyler's strict stance as a states' rights advocate, it is easy to see why he would agree that privatizing the banking industry would only help to de-centralize the Federal Government, and put control of the economy back into the hands of the states and local economies.

However, as Jackson's presidency progressed and he began to assert more authority, and Tyler was wary of the threat to states rights and eventually the institution of slavery that a more powerful presidency could mean. The event which pushed Tyler towards the Whig party, and

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<sup>5</sup> Michael A. Genovese. *Encyclopedia of the American Presidency*. (New York, Facts on File Inc., 2004) 452.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Monroe. *The Republican Vision of John Tyler* (TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2003).p 65.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Gales and William Seaton. *Gales & Seaton's register of debates in Congress* (Washington, Gales & Seaton, 1825-37.) p. 2173.

caused him to no longer support Jackson's presidency was the nullification crisis of 1832. During his election race, the Jackson-Calhoun ticket had promised to reduce the imposing protectionist tariffs imposed by John Quincy Adams in 1828. However, after they failed to do so, the state elected to exercise its right to nullify a government law which it deemed unconstitutional.

Jackson's vice-president John C. Calhoun was a staunch defender of a states' right to nullify, and eventually resigned over the issue. After the compromise tariff of 1832 was rejected by many of the southern states, including South Carolina, Jackson took steps to militarily enforce the tariff in the state.<sup>8</sup> It was over this crisis that many southern Senators withdrew their support for Jackson, and joined the Whig party, simply to oppose the Jackson presidency. While this exodus of Jackson supporters within the Democratic Party allowed the Whig party to gain enough power to eventually seize the presidency, it gave birth to the underlying factions which would ultimately surface during Tyler's term, and cause him to be exiled from the party.

Stemming from his background as a wealthy Virginian planter, Tyler was a fervent protector of states' rights. This was a common political stance among southern politicians in the decades leading up to the civil war, and stemmed from the early political foundations implemented by Thomas Jefferson, who in the Kentucky and Virginia resolutions determined that because the federal government derived its power from the states, the states could determine if a law passed by congress was constitutional. It was this argument which southern politicians used to protect the institution of Slavery in the south.<sup>9</sup> Many of these southern politicians joined the Whig party, as it was the strongest option to oppose Jackson, and allowed them to gain enough power to protect their states rights. However, the essential platform of the Whig party centered around Henry clay and his "American system" which promoted expansion and investment in

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<sup>8</sup> Genovese, 452.

<sup>9</sup> Genovese, 452.

infrastructure which would aid fledgling industries in the West. Also, northern bankers who opposed Jackson's veto of the Second Bank of the United States joined the Whig party to protect their financial interests.<sup>10</sup> In essence there were three separate factions, from three separate industries and regions of the country, united only in their opposition to Jackson. This sort of factionalism could only remain stifled while the Democrats were in control. Once the Whig party seized power during the election of 1840, problems began to surface. The Whig ticket was comprised of William Henry Harrison, who represented the interests of Clays "American System," and Tyler, who was added to the ticket to appease the Southern defenders of States rights. In elections prior to 1840, the strategy of political parties, especially the Democratic-Republican ticket of Andrew Jackson, was to sacrifice political harmony simply to add votes. Although Harrison and Tyler were both Whigs, they agreed on little besides their dislike of Jackson. However, because there was no precedent for replacing a president upon his death, Whig leaders could not have foreseen the problems that would arise once Tyler replaced Harrison.

There was considerable confusion surrounding Tyler, following the death of William Henry Harrison, in that the Constitution only stated that upon the president's death or removal, the powers and duties of the president belong to the Vice-president, but did not mention if the actual title of President was inherited as well. Members of the opposition party, as well as Tyler's fellow Whig's, were slow to grant full presidential title to Harrison, in fear that it would hurt their own private agenda. Henry Clay, who was the unquestioned leader of the Whig party, had carefully constructed the Harrison-Tyler ticket, to insure both that the Whig party would win the election and that he could exercise power through Harrison, whom he had heavy influence over. Therefore, he was outraged when Tyler replaced Harrison as president determined to use his

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<sup>10</sup> Genovese, 453.

presidential authority. The manner in which Tyler was utilizing his executive power forced congress and the house to acknowledge him as president in both title and authority. On June 11, 1841 motions passed in both the house and congress to officially change the protocol of replacing the president, by bestowing the vice-president with full executive name and power.<sup>11</sup> However, the controversy behind his rise to the position haunted Tyler's presidency. Politicians from both parties never fully respected his authority, despite the strong manner which he asserted it, and even members of his cabinet referred to Tyler as "his accidency."<sup>12</sup>

Tyler's power was constantly being threatened by those who were supposed to support him. Members of the Cabinet which he inherited from Harrison, seemed determined to undermine his authority in order to promote Clay's "American System" which had already been underway during Harrison's short term. Secretary of State, Daniel Webster was quick to check Tyler's executive power, "Mr. President...our custom and proceeding was that all measures, whatever, however, relating to the administration were brought before the cabinet and their settlement was decided by a majority-each member- including the president- having one vote."<sup>13</sup> It was Webster's hope that by challenging Tyler on the American system, he could set a precedent where the Agenda of Henry Clay could be forced passed Tyler through a cabinet vote, where the President's only authority was as an administrator. However, Tyler had other ideas about the executive branch,

" I am very glad to have in my cabinet such able statesmen as you have proved to be...but I shall never consent to being dictated to as to what I shall or shall not do. I, as President, will be

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<sup>11</sup> Steven G. Obrien. *American Political Leaders*. (California, ABC-CLIO, 1999) 405.

<sup>12</sup> O'Brien, 405.

<sup>13</sup> Leonard Dinnerstein. The Ascension of John Tyler to the Presidency. ([\*The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography\*](#), Vol. 70, No. 4 (Oct., 1962)) pp. 447-458

responsible for my administration...I shall be glad to have you with me, when you think otherwise, your resignation will be accepted."<sup>14</sup>

From this point on Tyler was on a political island as president, by refusing to be a puppet for Henry Clay, he lost the support of his party. These events coupled with his earlier actions regarding the way he withdrew support for Jackson and the Democratic - Republican Party, left him with nowhere to turn.

The apparent ineffectiveness of his presidency simply reflects this lack of support, which is a bi-product of Tyler setting an important precedent that the authority of the executive branch is vital, despite how the person filling the position came into power. Had Tyler accepted his role as Clay's puppet, a dangerous standard would have been set regarding not only the power of a Vice-president after the removal of an elected president, but even for elected presidents. If Tyler let his cabinet control the executive decisions, the same fate could be possible for future presidents and the power of the executive branch would be compromised, creating more of an executive council, than a true head of state. Although his assertion of power was important, it crippled him as president. Whig leaders continually tried to force their agenda, only to face an executive veto from Tyler, and little was accomplished from either political party. As a strict defender of states' rights, Tyler could not support the majority of the Whig policies, and the weak structural makeup of the party was exposed. The fact that little was accomplished politically from 1841-1844, has little to do with Tyler's leadership abilities and more to do with the inconsistencies of Whig ideology. Had Clay and other Whig leaders established a consistent doctrine there would have been no conflict between Tyler and congress, because Tyler would never have been on the Ticket as vice-president. Clay sacrificed political cohesion in order to guarantee votes, and either did

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<sup>14</sup> Mark O. Hatfield *Presidents of the United States, 1789-1993* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997), pp. 137-146.

not fore-see the possibility of Tyler replacing Harrison, or assumed he could manipulate Tyler as easily as he did Harrison. Had he looked more closely at Tyler's political past of being a strong and independent actor, for example in 1836 where he opted to resign from office instead of voting to expunge a censure which he had previously supported, he would have known that Tyler was a man who would not be pushed around politically.<sup>15</sup>

It was this constant conflict with congress which stains his reputation. Tyler was the first president to have Congress override his veto. There was also a failed movement in congress to impeach Tyler, the first movement to do so in US history.<sup>16</sup> From the moment he took office, Tyler's determination to protect his executive authority basically insured that he was a "lame duck" president for his entire term. Not only did he not have the support of his or any party, but even his cabinet, all of whom resigned in September of 1841, did not support him. Shortly after the resignation of his cabinet, he was expunged from the Whig party, and became a president with no official support. He battled constantly with both parties, blocking their legislation while having his own shot down in congress. He once had a nomination for secretary of Treasury shot down three times in one day, but continued sending it back as a sign that he would not buckle under partisan pressure.<sup>17</sup>

Despite these difficulties, Tyler was able to accomplish several important goals as president. Among these important accomplishments was the annexation of Texas in 1844. In order to do so Tyler skillfully maneuvered a joint-resolution, proving that he was a capable politician who could cross party lines in order to accomplish a goal. He proved that despite domestic political struggle, his strong assertive attitude was useful in foreign affairs. Tyler

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<sup>15</sup> O'Brien, 405.

<sup>16</sup> Genovese, 452.

<sup>17</sup> Monroe, 141.



established important economic ties with China in the Treaty of Wanghia, and extended the Monroe-Doctrine to protect Hawaii from British pressure, and insure that the islands would one day be a part of the United States.<sup>18</sup> Although viewed by some as stubborn and uncompromising, these characteristics allowed him to strongly assert the United States presence in foreign affairs.

The view of historians that Tyler was a weak or ineffective president is simply inaccurate. It is true that he constantly battled with congress and had a hard time getting legislation passed, but this is a bi-product of problems with the makeup of the Whig Party. Within the party there were three very distinct factions representing separate regional and political ideology. Also the strong political presence of Henry Clay insured that no man acting as a Whig President would be free from his political influence. The Whig party was united against the strong federal authority of the Jackson presidency; however, Tyler was drawn to the Whig party because of his opposition to the Nullification process. Tyler was so determined to protect states rights that he would align himself with anyone who would grant him enough power to protect his policies and oppose those who wanted to see an increase in central authority. Even the slogan of the 1840 Campaign, "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too..." suggests a political polarization within the party that would eventually render Tyler ineffective. It is accurate to say that Tyler was a stubborn man who was not afraid to break with a party in order to act independently, however that is not enough to condemn him as an inept president. In other historical instances people are applauded for standing their ground and refusing to compromise their beliefs. Any ill-repute pointed at Tyler should be redirected towards men like Clay and Webster, who could not be elected themselves, and were determined to gain the presidency and exercise authority by any means necessary. The Whig party itself was the biggest flaw of John Tyler's presidency, not the man himself.

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<sup>18</sup> Oliver Perry Chitwood. John Tyler: Champion of the Old South. (NY: Russel and Russel Inc., 1964). 74.

## **An Independent Mind: Andrew Johnson and Lincoln's plans for Reconstruction**

"No, gentlemen, if I am to be shot at, I want no man to be in the way of the bullet."- Andrew Johnson<sup>19</sup>

Andrew Johnson was a man who made no excuses; he was a strong independent and a self-made Civil War politician, cut from the same cloth as the man he replaced, Abraham Lincoln.

However, for all their personal and political similarities, Lincoln is most commonly remembered as the United States' most beloved President, and Johnson is considered a bigot, who was too stubborn to guide the country through reconstruction. There is no question, that when Johnson replaced Lincoln, 1865 that he perhaps had the largest void to fill of any job in history. Lincoln was a proud symbol of a new nation that had finally abolished slavery and his assassination is perhaps the darkest hour the United States has known. However, Lincoln chose Johnson as his vice-president knowing very well that under some turn of events he may have to take the office, and fully believed that he was capable of doing so. Lincoln felt that having Johnson at his side, a staunch defender of states rights, who had owned slaves but supported the Union during the Civil War, would make them the ideal duo to piece the nation back together.<sup>20</sup> Both Lincoln and Johnson grew up in abject poverty determined to educate themselves and use their education for public office. These two men were coming from these blue-collar backgrounds to face the difficult task of re-uniting the country after the Civil war had pitted brother against brother and claimed the lives of over one million United States Citizens.

Like Lincoln, Johnson favored a lenient and quick reconstruction plan, which would aid the

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<sup>19</sup> Lillian Foster. *Andrew Johnson, President of the United States: His Life and Speeches* (New York, Richardson & Co., 1866) p 33.

<sup>20</sup> Genovese, 272.

healing of the country rapidly and prevent any long lasting resentment of southerners against the north. In his "Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction" Lincoln made it clear that he would not aim to punish the seceded states,

"I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, do proclaim, declare, and make known to all persons who have, directly or by implication, participated in the existing rebellion, except as hereinafter excepted, that a full pardon is hereby granted to them and each of them, with restoration of all rights of property, except as to slaves, and in property cases where rights of third parties shall have intervened, and upon the condition that every such person shall take and subscribe an oath, and thenceforward keep and maintain said oath inviolate; and which oath shall be registered for permanent preservation, and shall be of the tenor and effect following, to wit."<sup>21</sup>

While many of the more radical Republicans in Congress were calling for strict and harsh penalties against the southern states and their readmission to the Union, Lincoln ignored any personal resentment he had toward southern states and their leaders for the betterment of the country. After he was assassinated, Johnson adopted his cause, refusing to punish the southern states, to the outrage of Radical Republican politicians. Despite having a strategy for reconstruction which echoed Lincoln's, Johnson is lambasted by historians as inept and ineffective. Today, he is mostly remembered as being the first president to be impeached, a weak and petty politician who let his personal feelings about slavery allow the southern states to escape punishment. These mistaken and unjust claims reveal a lack of overall understanding as to the complexity of the Reconstruction issue, and what needed to be done in order for the

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<sup>21</sup> John G. Nicolay and John Hay.ed. *The Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln V XIII*.(USA, Lincoln Memorial University, 1894) p. 443.

country to move forward. The bitter feud with congress which haunted the Johnson presidency can be blamed on a reactionary movement by congress to reassert power after the strong central authority implemented by Lincoln during the civil war. The success of Johnson as a politician, both prior to his term as president and during reconstruction, is marred by his impeachment trial, and the revisionist historians whose accusations of bigotry forever changed common perception of the seventeenth U.S. President.

Knowledge of Johnson's childhood and background is critical in defending the common perception that he was a bigot. Accounting for historical context is key when evaluating the personal attitude and beliefs of U.S. political figures prior to the civil war. For example, many presidents including Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson owned slaves and were proponents of the institution; however they largely escape criticism in broad historical context because of larger political successes. In examining the environment of the antebellum south, as a proponent of both states rights and an owner of slaves, Johnson's promotion of slavery prior to the war echoes the beliefs of most southerners, and the need of southern politicians to protect the livelihood of the south. It is unjust to judge historical figures within contemporary context, and certainly unfair to condemn them as ineffective public leaders. Historians cannot look back retrospectively and judge political figures compared to modern standards.

It is also asserted by many historians that Andrew Johnson was a racist, who held contempt for African- Americans, in fact Frederick Douglas is quoted as saying, "Whatever Andrew Johnson may be, he certainly is no friend of our race."<sup>22</sup> Clearly as a slave owner, Johnson was not the most racially progressive politician, or even a very pious or sophisticated man, in fact it is widely accepted that he was intoxicated during Abraham Lincoln's inaugural

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<sup>22</sup> Frederick Douglas. *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglas*.  
(<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/doug192/doug192.html>)

address. However, despite his personal feelings he was a defender of the Union during the Civil war and put down any pro-secession movements as the Governor of Tennessee.<sup>23</sup> As the most prominent Union politician in the south during the civil war, his belief in the cause must say something about his feelings regarding the institution of slavery. It is true that slavery is wrong, and as a completely unjust and inhumane institution remains a dark mark on United States history, however, within historical context, public politicians were protecting a tradition which had provided the south with every measure of success.

Johnson's background was a far cry from the plantations and state dinners of many of his political contemporaries. He was born in Raleigh, North Carolina on December 20, 1808, and spent most of his childhood impoverished following the death of his father when Johnson was three. His mother performed odd jobs, until she remarried when Johnson was eight. In 1820 as a twelve year old, Johnson was sent to South Carolina to work as a tailor's apprentice, and it was during this time that he taught himself to read and write. At the age of fourteen he ran away from his apprenticeship and fled to Greenville Tennessee. It was in Greenville that he met and married his wife, Eli McCradle, with whom he would eventually have five children. His wife played a pivotal role in his political career, as she helped to fill the holes that self-education had left in Johnson's academic training. Johnson used his desire to learn to become a well-developed formal debater, where he competed in local debates on behalf of the worker's party he developed in Greenville. It was on behalf of this party that he was elected mayor of Greenville and eventually elected to the Tennessee House of Representatives.<sup>24</sup>

Johnson then joined the Democrat party, where he gained a reputation as protecting the interests of the small farmer and common workingman. Johnson's main aim was to protect the

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<sup>23</sup> Genovese, 273.

<sup>24</sup> O'Brien, 218.

lower classes from the control of the powerful southern planting class. He was attracted to the Democratic Party because its promotion of states' rights allowed him to bring the power of farming and agrarian legislation into the State Senate, where he felt the condition of the working man was more easily protected when compared to the general more financially motivated federal system.<sup>25</sup> Johnson's early political career reveals a man determined for success and protecting the people who lived under the same conditions in which he was raised. He was used to protecting the interest of the downtrodden, which suggest why he later would champion the Union cause during the civil war.

Perhaps the greatest success of Johnson's career came as a Senator representing Tennessee, where he gained a reputation as a strong and well-spoken politician who believed in upholding and protecting the Constitution. His reputation as a great debater grew as he travelled throughout the state promoting several bills, such as the Homestead Act of 1862, which redistributed underutilized federal lands to the poor working class farmer whom Johnson had always defended. As a Southern Democrat he was in favor of slavery, because, as was true at the time, it was within a person's constitutional right to own slavery. Despite these beliefs he valued the preservation of the Union as the most pressing political issue, and when the topic of secession reached Tennessee in 1861, he fought against it.<sup>26</sup> Johnson was not some righteous defender of humanity or liberty, in fact it was quite the opposite, however, his support for the Union stemmed from his distrust of the southern Aristocracy who he believed destroyed the United States to protect their own financial interests. His disdain for African-Americans could also stem from the southern farmers that he represented. As members of the lower class, freed African Americans were immediate competition to poor white farmers. However, Johnson acknowledged

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<sup>25</sup> O' Brien, 219.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Winston. *Andrew Johnson: Plebian and Patriot*. (New York, AMS Press Inc., 1928.) p 80-85.

that the preservation of the Union was the most vital task, which is why Abraham Lincoln appointed him military governor of Tennessee in 1862.

As Lincoln's appointed Governor, Johnson made it his personal mission to drive any Confederate sympathizers from his state. It was this fervor for the Union coupled with his ties to the south which made him the easy choice for Lincoln's running mate in the election of 1864 as part of the National-Union party. Together, Lincoln and Johnson epitomized what would be required for the nation to heal itself. Lincoln, the very essence of the Union and the symbol of freedom for slaves as well as the republican Party, and Johnson, a Southern Democrat who had owned slaves but was willing to put aside his personal feelings for the preservation of the Union. These two men working together to guide the country through the challenge of Post Civil War reconstruction, was precisely what the country needed. However, even before his assassination, Lincoln was facing a lot of pressure from more Radical republicans like Benjamin Wade a Representative of Ohio, who authored the Wade-Davis Bill of 1864, and required that anyone in the south who did not fight for the Confederacy, take an "iron clad oath" to rejoin the Union. The Bill included a lot of radical language including section 4 which describes conditions for readmission:

"And be it further enacted, That the delegates shall be elected by the loyal white male citizens of the United States of the age of twenty-one years, who shall take and subscribe the oath of allegiance to the United States in the form contained in the act of congress of July two, eighteen hundred and sixty-two; ...but no person who has held or exercised any office, civil or military, state or confederate, under the rebel usurpation, or who has voluntarily borne arms against the

United States, shall vote, or be eligible to be elected as delegate, at such election.”<sup>27</sup>

The conditions of the Bill were harsh, and would have prevented the majority of southern leaders from entering political office, leaving the political and economical well being of the South to the mercy of the military governors, many whom were northerners. As a moderate, Lincoln quickly pocket-vetoed the bill, claiming that it prevented any swift reconstruction, and the language of the Wade-Davis bill, implied that a state could succeed from the Union, the opposite of which was the Union’s argument for war. In his address regarding the Wade-Davis Bill Lincoln addressed these concerns...

“that I am, and at all times shall be, prepared to give the executive aid and assistance to any such people, so soon as the military resistance to the United States shall have been suppressed in any such state, and the people thereof shall have sufficiently returned to their obedience to the constitution and the laws of the United States.”<sup>28</sup>

Lincoln made it clear that he did not want to punish the states, and that as soon as the citizens were ready to adhere to the newly adopted constitution which included the abolition of Slavery, Lincoln was ready to provide them with federal aid. Johnson supported Lincoln in this endeavor, and because of the political clout Lincoln held, had he not been assassinated, he may have been able to implement his plan with minor political backlash. However, when Johnson assumed presidency on April 15, 1865, the radical Republicans in congress who were already pestering Lincoln, looked to move past Johnson and implement their more strict plans for reconstruction.

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<sup>27</sup> *Transcript of the Wade-Davis Bill (1864)*

(<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=37&page=transcript>)

<sup>28</sup> BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: A PROCLAMATION (Lincolns Response to the Wade-Davis Bill)

(<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=old&doc=37&page=transcript>)



Many Historians writing during the Civil Rights era are harsh critics of Johnson's acts as president, claiming that he was too lenient on the southern States, and his motives for vetoing bills like the Civil Rights Bill of 1866 were racially motivated and set the civil rights of African American's back decades. However, a closer look at the situation, keeping in mind Johnson's past and Lincoln's plan for Reconstruction, reveals Johnson as a president who was more concerned with protecting states rights. He was determined to prevent Federal authority from encroaching on the rights of Southern states to determine how racial equality was approached in an individual state. As vice-president Johnson had won the hearts of radical republicans by speaking out against Confederate leaders who had violated the constitution, he is famously quoted as saying, "Honest conviction is my courage, the Constitution is my guide,"<sup>29</sup> As soon as he was sworn in as president Johnson entered a petty and intense feud with the Republican controlled congress. This feud left an ugly stain on the history of the United States political system, and led to the two movements for Johnson's impeachment, which failed twice in 1867. The Impeachment trials reflect the brutal and classless tactics employed by republicans, as opposed to the stubborn racism of Johnson, which is the view many historians such as Jay Tolson perpetuate, "his subsequent battles with Radical Republicans in Congress over a host of Reconstruction measures revealed political ineptitude and an astonishing indifference toward the plight of the newly freed African-Americans."<sup>30</sup> Historians like Tolson, focus only on the racial aspect of reconstruction, and fail to see the political pressures Johnson was facing from both the North and the South.

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<sup>29</sup> Hans L. Trefousse. *A Biography of Andrew Johnson*. (New York, W.W. Norton and Co., 1997) 13.

<sup>30</sup> Jay Tolson. *Worst Presidents: Andrew Johnson (1865-1869)*  
(<http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/history/2007/02/16/worst-presidents-andrew-johnson.html>). February 16, 2007

In the fall of 1867, there was a movement to impeach Johnson; however, it was quickly defeated in the Senate, because the Radical Republicans did not yet have any legal precedent to remove Johnson.<sup>31</sup> By 1867, Johnson's political power was all but gone, every plan the Johnson purposed for reconstruction was blocked by congress. They pushed instead a much harsher proposal with stricter requirements for readmission to the Union. Frustrated at the lack of support Johnson felt in Congress he verbally attacked Radical Republicans, and engaged in an ongoing feud with harsh name-calling and accusations coming from both sides. Radicals sensed that Johnson's back was against the wall and decided to pass the "Tenure of Office Act" to further subjugate his position as President. The Act, proposed in 1867 stated that the president could not fire an employee of the Executive Branch, without the consent of the Senate. It passed despite Johnson's vetoed and was aimed to protect the Radical members who held sway within Johnson's cabinet.<sup>32</sup> Johnson reacted, quickly and boldly in an effort to reassert himself and the powers of his office. Early in 1868 Johnson fired Secretary of War Edward M. Stanton, hoping to replace him with former civil war general, Ulysses S. Grant. Johnson meant to send a powerful message to Republicans that he would not accept the limitations that they place on his presidential office, however by firing Stanton and openly violating the Tenure of Office Act he gave Republicans the legal grounds to begin the impeachment process. After being fired, Stanton, as well the rest of the Republican party, charged the president with over riding the constitution and the Tenure of Office Act, and with these arguments, came the threat of impeachment. For Johnson the writing was on the wall, "The turning point has come, the Rubicon is crossed. You do not know what Mr. Stanton has said and done against me."<sup>33</sup> Johnson had little support left outside the

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<sup>31</sup> O'Brien, 219.

<sup>32</sup> Genovese, 273.

<sup>33</sup> Albert Castel. *The Presidency of Andrew Johnson*. (Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 1979) P 137.

politically weak South and he was now a president left to the whims of a congress determined to oust him from office.

In March of 1868 Radical republicans in the House of Representatives moved to impeach Johnson, for "High Crimes and Misdemeanors" a motion that passed 126-47. One French diplomat in Washington described the events, "The dark cloud has finally broken. The President called upon the lighting and the lightening came."<sup>34</sup> It was clear who was in control of the house, and Johnson's actions in trying to retain some level of presidential authority had given the Radical republicans a legal foundation for impeachment, and the following day the House sent this letter to the Senate:

"In the name of the House of Representatives and of all the People of the United States we do impeach Andrew Johnson, President of the United States, of high crimes and misdemeanors in office...and in their name we demand that the Senate take order for the appearance of the said Andrew Johnson to answer said impeachment."<sup>35</sup>

The trial in the Senate lasted three months, with the Defense of Johnson arguing that the Tenure of Office act only protected those members of a cabinet appointed by the current president. Because the deceased Lincoln appointed Stanton, Johnson argued that he was no longer protected by the Tenure of office act.<sup>36</sup> After a highly one-sided trial, controlled mostly by the Radical Republicans, the movement to impeach failed by one vote, that of Senator Edmund

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<sup>34</sup> Castel, 177.

<sup>35</sup> Winston, 425

<sup>36</sup> O'Brien, 219.

Ross of Kansas, who was disturbed by the openly partisan politics and slanderous vocabulary to describe the President.<sup>37</sup>

One of Johnson's final acts was to provide Amnesty for all former confederates on Christmas day of 1868.<sup>38</sup> A final act of defiance from a man who was backed into a corner from the time he was sworn into oath, but also an important necessity if the country was to move forward at all. As President Johnson was faced not only with the difficult task of replacing the man who is widely considered the one of the greatest president of all time, but he was forced to stand alone to protect the Reconstruction agenda which Lincoln believed would most quickly and efficiently reunite the nation. Any modern criticism of Johnson as a bigot simply ignores the context of his background and the constituents he was representing early in his career; he was a politician from the south who was concerned with defending the poor white farmers. However, when appointed Military governor of Tennessee he put any personal agenda aside and campaigned fervently for the Union and the suffrage of freed African Americans. He freed his own slaves, and despite the pressure of being a states- rights politician, he moved to defend what he knew was right. It was this same attitude which isolated him as president and put him at odds with the Radical Republicans which dominated the politics of his presidency. He refused to punish fellow Americans who had already had their very livelihood removed from them by warfare. If the presidency of Andrew Johnson is to be considered ineffective it should not be because he was a bad leader. Johnson established early in his political career that he was a fiery orator and shrewd politician, skills that garnered him the position of vice-president. The blame for the long and arduous political chaos that was the first period of Reconstruction should land squarely on the shoulders of men like Charles Sumner, who aimed to diminish the power of the presidency as

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<sup>37</sup> John F. Kennedy. *Profiles in Courage*. (New York, Harper Collins, 2000) p115-135.

<sup>38</sup> Castel, 187.

well as assert an extremist political agenda that would have accomplished little but further polarization of the nation. Johnson should be commended for remaining dedicated to the course for reconstruction designed by Lincoln and refusing to bend to the pressure of Congress, even though that meant making himself a political outcast. There is no doubt that had Lincoln not been assassinated, he too would have had a difficult time appeasing all parties involved in reconstruction, trying to integrate southern states into a government that seemed determined to punish them was a nearly impossible task. Andrew Johnson was a strict adherent and defender of the Constitution, and by refusing to back down when faced with impeachment, he, as well as men like Edmund Ross, preserved the authority of the executive office. Later presidents, like Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt are applauded for asserting the strong leadership of the president during trying times, a trait that would not be possible had Johnson allowed congress to set a dangerous precedent during reconstruction. As a man and a leader his obituary describes him most accurately:

“Whatever else may be said of him, his integrity and courage have been seldom questioned though often proved. He was by nature and temperament squarely disposed toward justice and the right, and was a determined warrior for his convictions. He erred from limitation of grasp and perception, perhaps, or through sore perplexity in trying times, but never weakly or consciously. He was always headstrong and "sure he was right" even in his error in trying times, but never weakly or consciously.”<sup>39</sup>

Johnson was not one to second guess himself. He was sure he knew what was best for the country, unfortunately so did a large group of Radical Republicans who controlled congress.

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<sup>39</sup> New York Times Obituary of Andrew Johnson (August 1, 1875)  
(<http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/1229.html>)

Johnson's determination and drive, which took him from a small country background with little education to the White House. He had the unfortunate task of piecing a country back together, and replacing Abraham Lincoln, two factors which would have deterred most politicians, but Johnson remained steadfast in his beliefs and refused to buckle even if that meant he would be frowned upon by history.

## **Betrayed: Big Business and the Presidency of Warren G. Harding**

"I have no trouble with my enemies. I can take care of my enemies all right. But my damn friends, my god-damned friends, White, they're the ones who keep me walking the floor nights!"<sup>40</sup>

-Warren G. Harding

Warren G. Harding was a popular man. Handsome and outgoing he was destined for success; however, as president it was clear that he was overwhelmed. The message of his campaign was a "return to normalcy," after the trauma of World War Two, a message that was something the American people sorely needed. However, many of the Republican politicians who played a part in his election supported this idea only in theory. Harding did not have an intellectual grasp on the position and relied heavily on his friends and supporters to aid him in his decision making. Unfortunately, these men, many of whom were responsible for his nomination as the Republican candidate in 1820, abandoned him. They pursued their own business interests, leading to the biggest presidential scandal in American history at the time, "The Teapot Dome Scandal." Harding was betrayed by those who empowered him, and died while in office, a deceived and defeated man. Men like Harding's Secretary of the Interior, Albert B. Fall, are responsible for Harding's now tarnished reputation. Had they instead chosen to use their abilities to lead the nation, instead of exploit it, Harding could have provided the personality and bravado that the country desperately needed.

A look at Harding's background reveals a man from modest upbringing who enjoyed success as a charismatic newspaper editor. His small town appeal and likability were perhaps the two

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<sup>40</sup> Eugene Trani and David Wilson. *The Presidency of Warren G. Harding*. (Kansas, The Regents Press of Kansas, 1977). P 189.

biggest factors in his nomination as president, so it is vital to understand where he came from and how that appealed to voters. Warren Gamileal Harding was born on November 2, 1865, as the firstborn child of a doctor and a midwife. He was raised in the small Ohio town of Caledonia, where his father purchased a newspaper and Harding began to learn the family trade. Harding's educational background is modest for a twentieth century president, considering he attended, Ohio Central College, where he studied journalism.<sup>41</sup>

After college, Harding and two of his friends purchased a small newspaper in Marion, Ohio, the *Marion Star Daily*, and Harding used the paper as a platform to defend his right- wing beliefs. Under Harding the paper quickly gained success, as he became a popular and influential journalist in Marion County. After marrying his wife, Florence DeWolfe in 1891, Harding quickly turned the Marian Star Daily into a profitable business and his politically driven columns and popularity within Marian County, made a political future inevitable. He was chosen for a seat in the Ohio State Senate in 1899, and was elected Lieutenant Governor in 1903, where he served for four years. In 1910 he was the Republican candidate for Governor in Ohio, but was defeated. However, two years later he was thrust onto the national political scene when, because of his good looks and speaking ability he was chosen to give the inaugural address for President Taft. He used this popularity to gain a Senate seat in Ohio in 1914, and held that seat until he was elected president.<sup>42</sup>

Harding's early political career is important in that it reveals the traits that would eventually garner him the presidency. Historians, whether writing favorably or critically of Harding acknowledge his good looks and personality as important contributors to his Political success. Harding was a vibrant speaker, who had a way of leaving a favorable impression on people.

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<sup>41</sup> Randolph C. Downes *The Rise of Warren Gamaliel Harding 1865-1920* (Ohio, Ohio State University Press, 1970) p 3-16.

<sup>42</sup> Downes, 16-56.



Whether it was fellow Ohio Republicans, or the friends which frequented his poker game, Harding's congeniality and handsome looks made him popular wherever he went.<sup>43</sup> In his book *The Rise of Warren Gamaliel Harding*, Randolph C. Downes sums up the three key factors in shaping the candidate who was perfect to bring some kind of order back to the country, "He was a loyal Marian booster, an ardent "Ohio Man" and a skilled Politician of the Republican persuasion. Republican loyalty, discipline and unity made up his central political faith. So thoroughly acquainted with the personalities and agencies of Ohio and national politics did he become, so eloquent and personable was he in his public appearances, that by 1920 he was considered to be of presidential timber."<sup>44</sup> Downes describes the charisma that garnered Harding political success. His fellow republicans knew they could count on him for support no matter what, because he was such an ardent supporter of the Republican agenda and overall party unity. He used his personality and friendliness to bring republicans together in Ohio, a key attribute for the Republican Party in 1920.

Downes also points out how Harding's work at unification in Ohio brought him to the attention of a divided Republican convention in 1920, "As the restored Republican spokesman for Ohio, he sparked a campaign of wooing Progressives and denouncing Democrats which set the pace for the party's unity both nationally and statewide...He was leading the party back to unity and, in doing so was directing his own steps towards the White House."<sup>45</sup> The Republican party of 1920 was far from united, and the failures of the tail end of the Wilson administration left the door open for a candidate who could regain power for the GOP. So when divisiveness within the party gridlocked the 1920 Republican convention in Chicago, Harding, the man who had worked to unite the party in Ohio, became a candidate of compromise and unity.

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<sup>43</sup> Trani and Wilson, 31.

<sup>44</sup> Downes, IX.

<sup>45</sup> Downes X.

The political and economic circumstances, with which Harding, a relatively unknown senator from Ohio, was able to gain a majority of the party's nominations, foreshadow the weakness and scandals which would plague his presidency. The fact that Harding was even elected President reveals the faults of the Republican party leading up to the 1920 election. There was no clear leader, and the party remained so divided that Warren G. Harding emerged as a candidate simply because he had few enemies. Harding was reluctant to make waves during his Senatorial career, and followed the lead of more influential Republicans.<sup>46</sup> This appealing quality, coupled with the inter-party quarreling involved in the Republican nomination of 1920, are the two biggest players involved in Harding becoming a compromise solution as a candidate. Woodrow Wilson's failing health, as well as the United States unpopular involvement in World War I meant that whoever the Republicans nominated would likely be elected President. This reality created tensions and factions within the GOP leading up to the Republican Convention of 1920. There were several candidates representing each faction, all unwilling to back down to release the stalemate.

At the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago, Republicans realized that a compromise would have to be made, and after several meetings Harding emerged as the party's top candidate. There is a reason why Harding is considered a "dark horse" candidate, because at the time he was nominated he was not a party leader, and was relatively unproven politically. He had been on the senate for five years, and had not made any significant legislation or revealed himself as a highly skilled politician. The scandals within his presidency should come as no surprise considering he was a compromise candidate who emerged from a divided party. It was during the hours prior to his nomination that Wilson made perhaps the biggest mistake of his Presidency. Wilson denied that he had any hidden secrets which would haunt the party should he be elected, hiding the fact

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<sup>46</sup> Genovese, 218.

that he had been having an ongoing affair with Carrie Fulton Phillips, a longtime family friend.<sup>47</sup> This denial allowed the process of his nomination to continue, and when it was revealed during his presidency, allowed his detractors to paint him as a womanizer who cared more about chasing women than running the country. However, had his affair been the only scandal to plague his presidency, history's view of Harding may be more favorable, but another critical economic circumstance of the Republican convention laid the groundwork for the largest detraction of Harding's Presidency.

In his work entitled "The teapot Dome Scandal" Laton McCartney, reveals the economic factors which contributed to Harding's nomination. The United States had emerged from World War I with relative economic ease and was ready to enter the high times of the "Roaring 20's". With the changing of the political tides, influential oil and business men were looking to influence the Republican nomination and find a candidate willing to fill his cabinet with "business friendly" politicians.<sup>48</sup> With his history of backing the party and putting unity first, it is easy to see why Harding was their choice. Major Oil companies were tired of having their agendas slowed by the Wilson administration and were willing to pay to see the right people get elected. McCartney points out the influence of the Standard Oil Man, Jack Hamon, who was at the Chicago convention with a million dollars "shopping for a president."<sup>49</sup> Using his money and influence Hamon was able to rally party leaders from Oklahoma, Texas, Arizona and New York behind Harding. The idea that the presidential nomination, and given the circumstances the presidency, could be bought reveals the muddled political context of the time. Big Business had been put on the back burner during the Wilson administration due to World War One, and was now poised to push a very specific political agenda. It is only fitting that big oil play such a

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<sup>47</sup> Laton McCartney *The Teapot Dome Scandal* (New York, Random House, 2008) 34.

<sup>48</sup> McCartney, 14.

<sup>49</sup> McCartney, 26.

large role in his nomination, seeing how it would eventually be his ties to oil which would forever tarnish Harding's legacy as President.

Once on the campaign trail, it was clear why the GOP had chosen Harding. They portrayed him as an everyman from Ohio, who was just what the country needed after The Great War. As part of his "Front Porch Campaign" Harding ran a campaign largely from his home in Mount Vernon, and gained favor under the banner of a "return to Normalcy."<sup>50</sup> The "Normalcy" which Harding was referring to was a Pre-WWI period. Republicans played up the Democrats willingness to involve the United States in World War I and used it to their advantage on the campaign trail. The policy before the war had been for the United States to be an isolationist nation, concerned only with its own affairs. Harding pushed this idea on the campaign trail, assuring that the United States would remain out of foreign conflict with him as president. Harding also pushed a less active government than that of the reform Era under Wilson.<sup>51</sup> On the Campaign trail Harding was also able to secure the votes of immigrants and women, because of the injustices he claimed they received during the Wilson administration.<sup>52</sup> This combined with his natural good looks and charisma, made him a huge favorite entering the election, and the result was the largest landslide victory in history. Harding and his running mate Calvin Coolidge received 16 million popular votes, while Jimmy Cox, and his running mate, a young naval commander named Franklin Roosevelt received only 9 million.<sup>53</sup> The large margin of victory has more to do with a reaction against the later years of the Wilson administration, than Harding's popularity. However, Harding's campaign strategy and ability to speak and sell himself as a leader definitely aided in his securing a large percentage of the moderate votes.

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<sup>50</sup> McCartney 36.

<sup>51</sup> McCartney 38.

<sup>52</sup> Trani and Wilson, 36.

<sup>53</sup> McCartney, 51.

Entering his presidency Harding had all the necessary tools for success. An unprecedented majority of the country had supported his election, and he filled his cabinet with some influential and renowned politicians, such as Andrew Mellon, Herbert Hoover, and his Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall, who was a famous international lawyer and had served on the Foreign Affairs committee. The effectiveness of his cabinet is evident in the number of progressive causes and international relations he backed. However, history seems to ignore any success he had because of two major scandals which rocked his presidency. The accusations of personal affairs, womanizing, and drinking can solely be blamed on Harding, yet history has shown that vices such as these can be overlooked if a leader is successful and a country thrives during his Presidency. The largest dark mark on the Harding era emanates from a scandal which the interest of Big oil were placed above those of the country, and a member of Harding's Cabinet found himself behind bars.

The "Teapot Dome" Scandal reveals that any alleged weakness of Harding as a president lies in the trust he had in the men he choose to surround himself with. Harding relied heavily on the members of his cabinet to guide the actions of his presidency, and policy that for the most part led to political success. However, the actions of his Secretary of the Interior, Albert Fall, represent a betrayal of this trust, the backlash of which has condemned Harding to the lower echelon of United States history. The controversy stems from Fall's accepting bribes to lease large federal oil reserves to his personal friends and business partners. The large oil Reserve at Teapot Dome, Wyoming was leased privately to Sinclair oil, after control over the fields had been passed from the Navy to the Department of the Interior. It was later exposed that Fall had accepted 100,000 dollars from the owner of Sinclair oil.<sup>54</sup> While the lease itself was legal, Fall continued to accept money from oil barons who sub-leased the oil fields from Sinclair oil, which

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<sup>54</sup> Tranni and Wilson, 180.

is illegal. Eventually Fall was exposed and a widespread Senate investigation ended with Fall behind bars, however, the reputation of Harding's presidency was forever tarnished. Harding was cleared of any involvement in the incident and his only misstep appears to have been trusting that Fall was conducting Federal Business legally.

Countless times during his administration Harding's trust was betrayed. Harding appointees from virtually every facet of the government were caught either accepting bribes or skimming profits. Colonel Thomas Miller, who had a reputation as a war hero, and headed the Office of Alien Property, was convicted of illegally transferring foreign owned firms into American hands. A foiled cover up, brought into light the involvement of the Attorney general, Harry Daugherty, as well as his assistant, Jess Smith, who eventually committed suicide. Accusations later arose that Daugherty, a close personal friend of Harding from his time in the Senate, was accepting bribes from bootleggers. Another one of Harding's friends, Charles Forbes, director of the Veteran's Bureau illegally sold goods for a profit and was eventually convicted of defrauding the government.<sup>55</sup> Again, those who Harding chose to bestow trust upon, betrayed their positions and their country all resulting in an unfavorable historical opinion of Harding. Both the Teapot Dome Scandal and the Miller Scandal were exposed after Harding's untimely death of a stroke on August 2, 1923 in San Francisco.

Historians Eugene Tranni and David Wilson are quick to point out the advantage of Harding's death for the Republican Party,

"For the Republican party, Harding's death was not untimely. It allowed the party to pass off culpability...with the airing of the scandals Republicans did everything in their power to dissociate themselves from Harding the man...It became plain that no prominent Republican was

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<sup>55</sup> Tranni and Wilson, 181-182.

willing to participate in a dedication ceremony of the Harding Memorial in Marion, scheduled for July 4, 1927. The dedication had to be postponed.”<sup>56</sup>

After his death the party shoved all the blame for the scandals off onto Harding's memory and he became the scapegoat for the GOP's scandals. Unfortunately for Harding no one in Washington defended his memory, and his presidency was remembered as one highly involved in fraud and illegal activity. As they had done during his life, those who Harding had trusted and considered friends abandoned him. In his official appointments he trusted men like Thomas Miller and Harry Daugherty, men who would eventually abuse their power at Harding's expense. Had Harding lived to defend himself, perhaps more of the men who took advantage of their offices would have been held accountable for their actions, but his death allowed the party to save face and cut ties with him and his presidential appointments. Robert K. Murray, a prominent historian who has defended Harding claims that had he lived, Harding would have went on the offensive against those who betrayed him, and prevented himself from becoming the era's whipping boy.<sup>57</sup>

From the second his name entered the conversation as a compromise candidate, he was set up for failure. The party was split, and there were too many conservative politicians looking to profit from big business particularly the oil industry. It was obvious that Harding was not ready to be an effective and powerful leader and his history of supporting party unity and following the conservative leaders made him the perfect puppet to install as leader and eventually take the fall for the party. His good looks and natural Charisma made him the perfect candidate, and the Reform policies of the Wilson administration and WWI almost guaranteed a Republican victory

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<sup>56</sup> Tranni and Wilson, 186.

<sup>57</sup> Robert K. Murray, *The Harding Era: Warren G. Harding and His Administration* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969) 536.

in 1920. Harding's personal indiscretions cannot be ignored. He drank, he smoked and he carried on a number of affairs, the most notable, with Carrie Phillips, was highly publicized. However, in the same polls which condemn Harding as one of the worst presidents ever; place other men with similar habits very highly. For example a 2009 CSPAN poll of US historians places Bill Clinton 15, while Harding sits much further down the list at 38.<sup>58</sup> It is clear that modern historians are willing to forgive marital indiscretions in the name of political or economic success. Unfortunately for Harding the illegal activity of his cabinet overshadow his biggest successes. For example, Harding showed powerful and decisive leadership qualities when his economic policies pulled the economy from it's post-war depression. His secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover, wanted more federal intervention which would have echoed the policies of Harding's democratic predecessors. Instead Harding opted for huge overall tax cuts to increase spending, a policy which was highly effective in reducing unemployment.<sup>59</sup>

Another aspect of Harding's policies that seems to be largely ignored is the legislation he passed on human rights. Many of the polls which place Harding in the bottom 25 percent consistently rank men like Andrew Jackson and Thomas Jefferson in the top five. Both men thrived as slave owners, another factor which is largely ignored in presidential polls. Harding fought for the anti-Lynching bill of 1922, an important piece of legislation during the 1920's when the Klu Lux Clan was terrorizing the African American populations of the south<sup>60</sup> These human and economic victories are overshadowed by the failures of the men that Harding trusted to help him run the country, most importantly the Teapot Dome scandal which was the largest executive office scandal until Richard Nixon's Watergate Scandal in the 1970's. Harding was

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<sup>58</sup> 2009 C-Span Historians Presidential Survey Poll (<http://www.c-span.org/PresidentialSurvey/Overall-Ranking.aspx>)

<sup>59</sup> Tranni and Wilson, 84.

<sup>60</sup> Tranni and Wilson, 104.



victimized by a torn and indecisive GOP, and the betrayal of his presidential appointments meant that no matter how many successes he enjoyed as a president, he will always rank towards the bottom of Presidential Polls. Harding became the scapegoat for a scandal ridden era of US politics, and his untimely death allowed the majority of the blame to be placed on his memory. His only failure was trusting those around him to make legal and effective decisions. Harding was a compromise candidate, who was handed the presidency, and his blind trust in his party and strong belief in Conservative unity were character traits which would eventually enable his demise.

## Conclusion: Friends as Enemies

For a leader to be effective, in any situation, they need the loyalty and support of those immediately beneath them. In a position as powerful as the presidency of the United States the support of both the party and the majority of the population is crucial if any improvements are to be made. For a leader to be effective in any situation, they need the loyalty and support of those immediately beneath them. Ronald Regan, who consistently ranks in the top ten of contemporary presidential polls said it best, “Surround yourself with the best people you can find, delegate authority, and don’t interfere as long as the policy you’ve decided upon is being carried out.”<sup>61</sup>

For three separate, but equally crippling reasons, Tyler, Johnson, and Harding, lost the support of their parties and were rendered politically handcuffed. History unfairly remembers all three men as ineffective, when they were simply the victims of partisan politics. Tyler was thrust into a disadvantaged position as the first vice-president to ascend to the presidency following an incumbent’s death. His presidency reflects the underlying issues with the Whig party; composed of men who were at first willing to ignore their own agenda's to challenge Jacksonian Democrats. However, once they seized power and Tyler replaced Harrison, the Whig party was exposed as really four separate groups with separate policies and legislation. Tyler defended his presidential power, which was constantly undermined by Henry Clay, who used his power over congress to constantly prevent Tyler from leading effectively.

Andrew Johnson faced perhaps the biggest challenge of any president entering office. He faced the insurmountable task of replacing the most revered president in History, and piecing the country together after a bloody and polarizing civil war. In following the course for

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<sup>61</sup> *That Was Then . . . This Is Now*:  
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,963765,00.html#ixzz0p4KvmTcj> (March 16, 1987)

Reconstruction laid down by Lincoln, Johnson put the nation on course for a quick and forgiving rebuilding process. However, Radical Republicans, who controlled congress, were determined to punish the south for the economic and human loss of the civil war. In his verbal and political battle with Congressional Republicans, Johnson was determined to reestablish the power of the executive office and prevent harsh policies from forever tearing the nation apart. The reason Johnson is reflected upon unfavorably is because he is remembered as the first president to be impeached. However a closer examination of the proceedings and the legislation he violated, reveal that the move to impeach reflects more petty political slander than any actual unconstitutional activity. Johnson should be commended for his insistence on protecting the power of the presidency and seeking a quick national healing after the civil war.

Harding perhaps has the worst reputation of any president. A combination of personal flaws coupled with a number of political scandals has permanently positioned him towards the bottom of presidential polls. However, after examining the circumstances of his nomination and the illegal activity, Harding is revealed as more of a scapegoat for the problems involved in the relationship between the GOP leadership and business interests. As an inexperienced compromise candidate, Harding was forced to rely heavily on the members of his cabinet and those he appointed to other positions of power. His loyalty and trust in the other members of his party led to his betrayal and forever tarnished his reputation. Harding's untimely death allowed him to become a scapegoat for four years of fraud and illegal activities. After his death, the party that had once nominated him as their best candidate for president, abandoned him, and his "friends" dishonored his memory to protect their own reputations. Herbert Hoover acknowledged this treachery poignantly in Harding's eulogy:

"Here was a man whose soul was seared by a great disillusionment. Warren Harding had a dim realization that he had been betrayed by a few of the men he had trusted, by men whom he had believed were his devoted friends. It was later proved in the courts of the land that these men had betrayed not only the friendship and trust of their staunch loyal friend but they had betrayed their country."<sup>62</sup>

Harding's poor reputation reflects the betrayal that Coolidge acknowledges, not his shortcomings as a leader or politician. In his effective social and economic policies Harding proved he could have been the effective and active leader that the country needed after WWI had left them politically disillusioned.

The problem with historical polls is that in the sheer numbers of presidents, a lot of the details are lost. Leaders are often remembered for one single failure or shortcoming, and often the bigger picture of their success or failure is lost. Tyler is ranked poorly because of the decline of Whig unity during his term. Johnson is remembered for being impeached and for his ugly verbal confrontations with congress and the Teapot Dome Scandal as well as other indiscretions prevents historians from fairly judging Warren G. Harding's time as president.

Looking at these three examples it becomes clear that party support is one of the most crucial tools in effectively running the country. It is the nature of partisan politics that if a president strays too far away, or follows blindly behind their party, they will lose the ability to run the country the way they see fit. It is in the interest of the President, and subsequently the country to first and foremost effectively lead his party, because failure to do so creates a political gridlock which pits the executive office into a power struggle with congress. In Tyler and Johnson's case, this power struggle essentially made them "lame duck" presidents for the duration of their term, unable to advance their own agenda without the support of congress,

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<sup>62</sup> Tranni and Wilson, 187.

while at the same time utilizing the power of veto to block any opposing policies. Harding's example represents the opposite situation, where a President is so determined to unify the party and create cohesion that he ignores his role as party leader and is taken advantage of. A leader must walk the line between compromise and authority, and for reasons largely out of their control, Harding, Tyler, and Johnson were unable to do so. Contemporary historians have written these men off as poor leaders, however, their apparent weaknesses do not reflect them as individuals, and instead indicate a necessity of partisan unity. In all three cases, each man enjoyed some sort of success, whether it was economically, socially or in foreign affairs, that proves that under the right conditions they could have been strong and capable leaders. The President of the United States is commonly referred to as "the leader of the free world," however as the examples of Tyler, Johnson and Harding affirm, no leader can stand alone.

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Table One. Rankings of U.S. Presidents by Historians

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## Historians Survey Results Category

### Total Scores/Overall Ranking

| President's Name                      | 2009 Final Score | Overall Ranking |      |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|------|
|                                       |                  | 2009            | 2000 |
| <a href="#">Abraham Lincoln</a>       | 902              | 1               | 1    |
| <a href="#">George Washington</a>     | 854              | 2               | 3    |
| <a href="#">Franklin D. Roosevelt</a> | 837              | 3               | 2    |
| <a href="#">Theodore Roosevelt</a>    | 781              | 4               | 4    |
| <a href="#">Harry S. Truman</a>       | 708              | 5               | 5    |
| <a href="#">John F. Kennedy</a>       | 701              | 6               | 8    |
| <a href="#">Thomas Jefferson</a>      | 698              | 7               | 7    |
| <a href="#">Dwight D. Eisenhower</a>  | 689              | 8               | 9    |
| <a href="#">Woodrow Wilson</a>        | 683              | 9               | 6    |
| <a href="#">Ronald Reagan</a>         | 671              | 10              | 11   |
| <a href="#">Lyndon B. Johnson</a>     | 641              | 11              | 10   |
| <a href="#">James K. Polk</a>         | 606              | 12              | 12   |
| <a href="#">Andrew Jackson</a>        | 606              | 13              | 13   |
| <a href="#">James Monroe</a>          | 605              | 14              | 14   |



|                                     |     |    |    |
|-------------------------------------|-----|----|----|
| <a href="#">Bill Clinton</a>        | 605 | 15 | 21 |
| <a href="#">William McKinley</a>    | 599 | 16 | 15 |
| <a href="#">John Adams</a>          | 545 | 17 | 16 |
| <a href="#">George H. W. Bush</a>   | 542 | 18 | 20 |
| <a href="#">John Quincy Adams</a>   | 542 | 19 | 19 |
| <a href="#">James Madison</a>       | 535 | 20 | 18 |
| <a href="#">Grover Cleveland</a>    | 523 | 21 | 17 |
| <a href="#">Gerald R. Ford</a>      | 509 | 22 | 23 |
| <a href="#">Ulysses S. Grant</a>    | 490 | 23 | 33 |
| <a href="#">William Howard Taft</a> | 485 | 24 | 24 |
| <a href="#">Jimmy Carter</a>        | 474 | 25 | 22 |
| <a href="#">Calvin Coolidge</a>     | 469 | 26 | 27 |
| <a href="#">Richard M. Nixon</a>    | 450 | 27 | 25 |
| <a href="#">James A. Garfield</a>   | 445 | 28 | 29 |
| <a href="#">Zachary Taylor</a>      | 443 | 29 | 28 |
| <a href="#">Benjamin Harrison</a>   | 442 | 30 | 31 |
| <a href="#">Martin Van Buren</a>    | 435 | 31 | 30 |
| <a href="#">Chester A. Arthur</a>   | 420 | 32 | 32 |
| <a href="#">Rutherford B. Hayes</a> | 409 | 33 | 26 |

|  |     |    |    |
|--|-----|----|----|
| <a href="#">Herbert Hoover</a>         | 389 | 34 | 34 |
| <a href="#">John Tyler</a>             | 372 | 35 | 36 |
| <a href="#">George W. Bush</a>         | 362 | 36 | NA |
| <a href="#">Millard Fillmore</a>       | 351 | 37 | 35 |
| <a href="#">Warren G. Harding</a>      | 327 | 38 | 38 |
| <a href="#">William Henry Harrison</a> | 324 | 39 | 37 |
| <a href="#">Franklin D. Pierce</a>     | 287 | 40 | 39 |
| <a href="#">Andrew Johnson</a>         | 258 | 41 | 40 |
| <a href="#">James Buchanan</a>         | 227 | 42 | 41 |

**TABLE ONE (HTTP://WWW.C-SPAN.ORG/PRESIDENTIALSURVEY/OVERALL-RANKING.ASPX)**